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ABSTRACT

Media coverage has given rise to various misconceptions about the scope of employer support for child care and the kinds of assistance most useful to employees. Some may believe that employer support for child care involves opening a child care center at the workplace. While employer-sponsored child care centers are highly publicized, they represent only one of a variety of programs an employer can establish to address their employees' child care needs. Child care is a concern of business because working parents are a significant portion of today's work force and because the child care problems of working parents are strongly linked to job performance. The child care supports that are most useful to employees are not necessarily the most costly. Employers are only part of the answer; federal, state, and local governments, public schools, nonprofit and for-profit child care agencies, and employers must work together to assure an adequate supply of high quality, affordable child care. (RH)

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Facts About Employer Support for Child Care

MYTHS AND REALITIES

Recently, the media have given an enormous amount of attention to the growing involvement of employers in child care. Unfortunately, media coverage also has given rise to various misconceptions about the actual scope of employer support for child care and the kinds of assistance most useful to employees. What follows is the reality behind four common myths about employer support for child care.

MYTH #1: Employer support for child care means opening a child care center at the workplace.

REALITY: While employer-sponsored child care centers are highly publicized, they represent only one of a variety of programs an employer can establish to address their employees' child care needs. Some of the options available to employers who want to offer child care assistance to working parents include:

- **Direct Care Services,** which help meet employees' child care needs: comprehensive resource and referral services, child care centers, family day care networks, emergency child care, and sick child care services.
- **Employee Financial Assistance,** which helps parents pay for child care: dependent care assistance plans, subsidies, vouchers, and discounts.
- **Flexible Personnel Policies,** which make it easier for employees to manage work and family responsibilities: parental leave, sick and personal leave, alternative work schedules, and flexiplace.
- **Information Assistance,** which educates parents as child care consumers and trains supervisors to be sensitive to employees' family responsibilities.
- **Community Development Funds,** which help expand and develop child care resources.

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MYTH #2: Child care is a family problem, not a business problem.

REALITY: Child care is a concern of business because working parents are a significant portion of today's work force. Almost one-third of all workers in the U.S. labor force have children under 13 years of age, and 80% of these working parents are part of dual wage-earning couples or are single parents (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1987). In both situations, no parent is at home to care for the children. Trying to balance work and child care responsibilities can result in serious conflicts on the job for these parents.

Child care is a concern of business because the child care problems of working parents are strongly linked to job performance. Recent studies have shown that difficulties parents have finding and managing child care are related to measures of productivity, such as absenteeism, short work days, and time spent dealing with family issues during work hours.

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Child care is a concern of business because labor force growth is declining and between now and the year 2000 nearly two-thirds of new workers will be women -- the majority of child-bearing age and many with young children. In order to improve their recruitment edge and retain valuable workers, many employers are finding that it makes good business sense to respond to the child care needs of their employees.

MYTH #3: Most employers cannot afford to provide child care benefits.

REALITY: The child care supports that are most useful to employees are not necessarily the most costly. Indeed, three of the most valuable supports also are among the most affordable:

- **Flexible work schedule policies:** Such policies not only facilitate day-to-day management of work and family scheduling, but also increase labor force participation by parents with young children who otherwise could not manage both job and parental responsibilities. Flexible work schedule policies include: flextime, voluntary part-time work, job sharing, work at home, parental leave to care for newborns or newly adopted children, and flexible leave policies that allow parents to take time off from work when they have pressing family business.

- **Paid sick days that can be used to care for sick children:** According to the NCJW Center for the Child's *Mothers in the Workplace* study, providing paid sick days to care for a sick child is the single most useful benefit for employed mothers with newborns -- even more useful than more costly benefits such as financial assistance with child care or an employer-sponsored child care center. This benefit is considered so valuable because child illness is the most frequent and unavoidable cause of absenteeism among working parents with young children. Many parents must risk their job, lose pay, or lie about the reason for missing work whenever their children are sick.

- **Managers and supervisors who are understanding and supportive of workers with competing work and family responsibilities:** Training managers and supervisors to deal sensitively and effectively with work-family conflicts experienced by their employees is vital to ensuring successful implementation of family supportive policies in the workplace. The *Mothers in the Workplace* study found that women who had supervisors who were understanding and supportive when they had work-family conflicts reported less difficulty finding time to manage their work and family responsibilities, and fewer problems arranging child care. Women with supportive supervisors also were less likely to feel stressed, and more likely to feel satisfied with their jobs and with their lives.

MYTH #4: Employer support for child care can provide the answer to the child care crisis in this country.

REALITY: Employers are only part of the answer. Federal, state and local governments, public schools, non-profit and for-profit child care agencies, and employers must work together to assure an adequate supply of quality, affordable child care. Perhaps the most important role employers can play in easing the child care crisis is to assess the child care needs and work-family conflicts of their own employees, and then work in partnership with local child care groups and government to respond to these needs.

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